

Constructing Monuments, Constructing Time: The Implications of Petro-Philanthropy in the  
Museum of Islamic Art at Doha, Qatar

Research Thesis

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Hotels, apartment buildings, and corporate headquarters with shimmering, plate-glass façades to dominate much of the rapidly changing skyline of Qatar's capital city, Doha. As one travels along Doha's waterfront promenade, the Corniche, away from the jostling skyscrapers of the West Bay business district, museums, cultural centers, and parks replace the corporate headquarters and luxury developments. A myriad of structures that surround the Souq Waqif, a re-furbished historical market that was shortlisted for an Aga Khan Award for Architecture in the 2008-2010 cycle. They reflect the efforts of the Qatari government to style Doha as an international center of culture: The Sheikh Abdulla Bin Zaid Al Mahmoud Islamic Cultural Center, its spiral minaret that imitates the famed original in the complex of the Great Mosque of Samarra; the staring eyes and too-cheery colors of Takashi Murakami's *Ego* are painted on the white cube of the AlRIWAQ contemporary art space; and the historic areas near Qatar's administrative and symbolic center, the Amiri Diwan, that have been recently restored (Fig. 1-2). Curving into the Persian Gulf from the proliferating development along the Corniche is Doha's most internationally-celebrated cultural institution: the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) (Fig. 3).

Designed by I.M. Pei and finished in 2008, the MIA's priceless collection, superstar architect, and synthesis of early Islamic architecture with stark postmodern forms represent the aspiration of the Qatari emirate to create in Doha an international cultural capital. Pei sought to create a building that would, in his view, embody the "essence of Islam".<sup>1</sup> In order to capture the multivalence of Islamic culture, art, and architecture in the MIA, Pei looked to cultures from Spain to the Indonesia for inspiration. In the MIA, Pei combines the historical forms that, to his mind, represent the history of Islam with his own modern and postmodern vocabulary. The result is a building that mediates between the past and the future—a structure that radiates something

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<sup>1</sup> Jodidio, Philip. *Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, Qatar* (Prestel Verlag, 2008), 46.

of the eternal in its solidity and isolation from the mainland on its artificial island. The fusion of contemporary and early Islamic elements in the Museum of Islamic Art adapts evokes an ur-past of Islamic civilization and asserts the the present Qatari state's ambitions, which are driven forward by the vast wealth made available to it by the sale of oil and natural gas. Petro-dollars suffuse Museum of Islamic Art's timelessness, complicating it and its collections, coloring its exploration of time and presence. In this essay, I will argue that the "petro-philanthropy" that made possible the construction of the MIA complex monumentalizes oil and freezes us in the Age of the Anthropocene by inviting us to lose ourselves in Pei's masterful synthesis of post-modern and early Islamic architectural forms. They evoke a glorious Islamic ur-past and cause us to ignore the inevitable post-oil future.

### **The Logic of "Petro-Philanthropy"**

"Petro-philanthropy" is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in the financing of the world's cultural institutions as state-funded arts programs disappear and institutional operations must increasingly rely on private donations and corporate sponsorships. Oil companies or entities closely associated with the petroleum industry seek to position themselves as corporate citizens in societies around the world by providing support to cultural institutions through donations and sponsorships.<sup>2</sup> The inseparability of oil money from institutions is especially evident in Gulf nations such as Qatar, whose economic relies almost entirely on oil and natural gas extraction. Mel Evans' 2015 book *Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts* argues that petro-philanthropy allows companies to "artwash" their dubious activities and construct an ethical, socially-conscious image that ignores problematic labor practices, environmental devastation, and, above all, the

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<sup>2</sup> Mel Evans, *Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 13.

transience of petroleum as an energy source.<sup>3</sup> Those entities associated with oil do not, however, simply disguise their questionable activities or absolve themselves via artwash. These companies, Evans argues, inscribe themselves and the caustic, unsustainable mythos of fossil fuels upon the multitude of histories and narratives that fill the galleries of the world's museums.<sup>4</sup>

The sway that individuals and corporations associated with the extraction and sale of fossil fuels hold over museums creates these institutions and their contents as ritual structures dedicated to petroleum. Petroleum, that black, viscous, (and quickly diminishing) entity prized by humans for over a century has allowed for enormous advances in technology, quality of life, and the accumulation of vast fortunes for those who deal in it. Exhibits organized to lead the museum-goer through stories of eras and civilizations become intimately associated with the story of oil when petro-philanthropy dictates the inner-workings of the art museum. At times, Big Oil even adapts the stories of certain civilizations that have been devastated by extraction and refinement that swept through a landscape, often on the tide of imperialism. Evans provides two examples of this bizarre phenomenon. She describes two exhibitions sponsored by BP entitled *East-West: Objects Between Cultures* (2006) and *The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting* (2008) at Tate Britain in London that centered on works from or relating to the Near East in an effort to both “engage a Muslim audience” and with Edward Said’s critique of orientalism.<sup>5</sup> Both of these exhibitions that purported to “engage with 150 years of continued culture and post-colonial critique” included objects from and relating to Iraq and surrounding areas that were the military targets of British and American troops following the September 11,

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<sup>3</sup> Evans, *Artwash*, 13-14.

<sup>5</sup> Evans, *Artwash*, 128.

2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City.<sup>6</sup> These exhibitions included a range of objects from painting to mercantile goods, and attempted to advance discussions of Great Britain's colonial and artistic history as it relates to the Near East. But instead it asked audiences to consider these relationships in galleries sponsored by BP who "was at that very moment engaged in the attempted sell-off of Iraq's resource wealth, which had been discussed in a secret meeting between the company and the government in 2002."<sup>7</sup> These exhibitions that asked audiences to reconsider Britain's colonial past and the relationships between the monolithic East and West thus had the incongruous dynamic of being in galleries sponsored by Big Oil who were, in the moment of the Iraq War, complicit in the destruction of the cultural context from which many of the objects in the exhibition came.

Through petro-philanthropy, however, Big Oil ties itself to each and every history curated and put on display in galleries around the world; logos, often discreet in the whiteness of the gallery space, imply the ownership over the story of civilization. Oil companies bolster their own status for shareholders and ensure the continuance of a narrative that portrays oil as an essential part of human life, the force that propels us forward in the innovative future. Carol Duncan argues that the art museum is our "most precious" cultural institution, a "ritual structure" or "ceremonial monument" built to "represent the order of the world, its past and present, and the individual's place within it."<sup>8</sup> In *Civilizing Ritual*, Duncan points to the art museum as *the* monument that defines a community's identity. It is a liminal space that acts as a portal into a constructed universe that organizes and "control[s] the representation of the community and its

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<sup>6</sup> Evans, *Artwash*, 128.

<sup>7</sup> Evans, *Artwash*, 129. Evans also provides quotes on the relationship between oil companies, politics, and the occupation of Iraq from Greg Muttit's 2011 book *Fuel on Fire: Oil and Politics in Occupied Iraq*.

<sup>8</sup> Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Ritual: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), 8.

highest values and truths.”<sup>9</sup> Precisely because of these powers to define and represent groups, the art museum is of great interest to those “in the highest circles of power.”<sup>10</sup>

If the art museum is such a powerful cultural agent, it is necessary to question the implications of petro-philanthropy. Corporate sponsorship and individual support by Big Oil and its proxies pervade these ritual structures and align the “values and truths” of communities with oil. Oil is written into the aggregations of history. Those who benefit from its sale create a mythology that of petroleum as eternal; the mythos of fossil fuels portrays them as a constant that allows humankind to triumph over nature and propel itself into the future.<sup>11</sup>

Michael J. Watts attempts to characterize the nature of petroleum mythology in “Petro-Violence: Some Thoughts on Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology.” Watts details eight features of petro-mythology and its promises to those who seek to extract it. First, he points out the most obvious of these properties: petroleum as a commodity (“oil as money”), but a commodity that generates wealth that far greater any other good or product.<sup>12</sup> Watts then argues that nationalized oil is unique in its ability to produce a state.<sup>13</sup> The state’s vision for itself becomes inseparable from oil when the government controls abstraction. National identity and vision are yoked to petroleum in a Faustian pact that troubles the “oil nation.”<sup>14</sup> States’ fortunes become dependent on the unsustainable substance that brings such great wealth. The so-called “el-Dorado effect” of oil that leads to massive booms in progress and the accumulation of untold

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<sup>9</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Ritual*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Ritual*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Michael J. Watts, “Petro-Violence: Some Thoughts on Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology” (paper presented at the UC Berkeley Workshop on Environmental Politics at UC Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, Berkeley, California, September 24, 1999). Accessed: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7zh116zd>

<sup>12</sup> Watts, “Petro-Violence,” 7.

<sup>13</sup> “[...]nationalized petroleum produces a state[...]which mediates the social relations by which oil is exploited (oncessions, joint ventures etc) and which is simulatenously granted access to the world market.” Watts, “Petro-Violence,” 7.

<sup>14</sup> Watts, “Petro-Violence,” 7.

wealth that, in Watts' assessment, hurtles communities into the volatile experiences of surreal and often devastating events such as rapid economic development (and rapid income inequality), conspicuous consumption, and the re-organization of society.<sup>15</sup> He re-iterates that when a state nationalizes its oil it creates a contested patrimony within the nation-state as the wealth it generates is distributed and utilized for various purposes.<sup>16</sup> Debates about national identity, rights, and citizenship inevitably begin to appear in oil states as other industries disappear and the "petrolization" of society begins.<sup>17</sup>

### **Oil, Culture, and the Qatar's National Vision**

Qatar's petro-history follows the progression laid out in Watts' analysis of extraction's effects on a community quite closely. As with so many other geographical locations, the founding of petroleum reserves in Qatar set in motion rapid changes to the small desert nation. Oil was discovered in Qatar in 1937 by Petroleum Development Qatar Ltd. in Dukhan, an area in the west of the country.<sup>18</sup> Its discovery did not catalyze immediate transformations to the country, whose economy still revolved largely around pearl-diving despite huge population losses and unemployment after the invention of the cultured pearl in Japan. It seems that oil almost immediately came under control of the then still quasi-British-controlled state. Today, extraction of oil and natural gas in Qatar continues to be under government control. Qatar Petroleum—the primary agent in the country's extraction, refinement, and export of fossil

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<sup>15</sup> "Oil as a world of illusion." Watts, "Petro-Violence," 7.

<sup>16</sup> Watts, "Petro-Violence," 8.

<sup>17</sup> "[...]oil produces what Karl (1997) calls the 'petrolization' of society: the economy becomes a sort of a one-horse town, and oil rents reinforce particular patterns of class power[...]and the boom produces depressive effects in other non-oil sectors." Watts, "Petro-Violence," 8.

<sup>18</sup> Ashraf M. Salama and Florian Wiedmann, *Demystifying Doha: On Architecture and Urbanism in an Emerging City*, (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2013), 67.

fuels—is intimately connected to the government, including members of the reigning Al-Thani family, intrinsically linking the activities of the state with extraction.

Oil may have appeared in Qatar in the 1930's, but production and export only developed after the Second World War. Power in the post-war moment was held by the Al-Thani family whose prominence in the region of Qatar extends back at least to eighteenth century when the clan was among the most prominent of the nomadic tribes that roved the area.<sup>19</sup> Doha became the capital after Qatar declared its independence in 1971. This decision was influenced not only by the population and advantageous location of the settlement, but also by the fact that it was the primary residence of the Al-Thani family who still control the emirate today. The post-war oil boom caused a massive increase in population, mostly in Doha, from the 1950's to the 1970's—from about 14,000 to over 80,000. Construction increased exponentially to meet the demands of the increased population and the new penchant for modern, Western-style apartment complexes in three decades following the end of the Second World War, effectively eliminating the old city center. Mostly concrete mid and high-rise buildings replaced the traditional courtyard-style homes constructed of wood, rock, and mud plaster in Doha's mitotic growth.<sup>20</sup> Offshore exploration in the 1970's led to the discovery of the so-called North Field, the largest gas field in the world, in the Persian Gulf although extraction did not begin until 1991. Operations at this site initiated a period of even greater wealth and influence for Qatar as the small nation became, and remains, a leader in the export of oil and liquefied natural gas.

Qatar's vast reserve of petro-dollars increases exponentially as they it continues to extract and export fossil fuels, allowing the state to subsidize many services for Qataris. As early as 1970, fossil fuels dominated Qatar's state functions to the point that it became essentially a

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<sup>19</sup> Salama and Wiedmann, *Demystifying Doha*, 69.

<sup>20</sup> Ibrahim Mohamed Jaidah and Malika Bourennane, *The History of Qatari Architecture* (Milan: Skira, 2009), 90.



welfare-state in which fossil fuels provided the capital for financial subsidies given to Qataris.<sup>21</sup> The practice of providing many goods and services such as healthcare, education, and free access to museums (including the Museum of Islamic Art) to Qataris free of charge continues today.<sup>22</sup> The administrative body that oversees the advancement of “education, science, and community development” in the country is the Qatar Foundation, founded in 1995 to “develop Doha into an important centre of knowledge-economies.”<sup>23</sup> Museums and other cultural institutions are also handled by the Qatar Museums Authority. Both of these state institutions are tied to an array of public-private partners, including the Qatar Investment Authority and the Qatar National Research Fund, who are responsible for investing petro-dollars in the country’s various sectors. Recent efforts to increase tourism and bolster the image of Doha as a cultural capital have been made possible by the increasing in-flux of money into these institutions through the public-private companies who maintain close ties to Qatar’s administrative center and royal residence: The Emiri Diwan (Fig. 4). However, these efforts to promote culture occur at a time when Qatar faces major housing and quality of life issues for its huge population of migrant laborers—mostly from South Asia—the low quality of building materials used in Doha’s rapid urban expansion since extraction began, and the development of environmentally-friendly strategies in the near-future.

### **Seeking the “Essence of Islam”**

In order to create a building that would appropriately represent Qatari ambitions to its citizens and to the international set, I.M. Pei looked to both the architectural and philosophical histories of Islamic civilizations for design inspiration when he received the commission to build

<sup>21</sup> Salama and Wiedmann, *Demystifying Doha*, 68.

<sup>22</sup> “Qatar: A tiny country asserts powerful influence,” YouTube video, 13:15, aired on CBS’ *60 Minutes* on January 4, 2012, posted by “CBS News,” January 4, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b\\_ZuXbOtBbo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_ZuXbOtBbo).

<sup>23</sup> Salama and Wiedmann, *Demystifying Doha*, 78.

the MIA, his first building in the Islamic world. Both led him back to one distinctive feature that would inform the entire process of creating the MIA: light.<sup>24</sup> Several Quranic passages discuss light in rich, metaphoric language that compares God to, among other things, a shining lamp and a star.<sup>25</sup> The Surah an-Nur (Light), which contains many of these exultant passages, emphasizes the infinity of the Divine as “light upon light” that emanates from the heavens to touch the faithful. Pei occasionally alludes to these more abstract conceptions of light in Islamic religious thought in interviews, but he constantly expresses his fascination with the way that light “activates” Islamic architecture.<sup>26</sup>

The Great Mosque in Córdoba (Fig. 5) was Pei’s first inspiration when he began formulating the design of the MIA. Almost entirely unfamiliar with the language of Islamic architecture, Pei believed that the Great Mosque embodied the “essence of Islam” for which he was searching.<sup>27</sup> The red-and-white striped horseshoe arches and hypostyle form of the Great Mosque soon felt “too Spanish” to the architect, however, and the strict geometric forms of early Cairene mosques and Tunisian fortresses<sup>28</sup> became the new point of departure for the MIA’s design.<sup>29</sup> Pei’s travels to the Maghreb and Egypt brought him into contact with stone buildings in desert environments which became “magical” beneath the harsh sunlight.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jodidio, *Museum of Islamic Art*, 59.

<sup>25</sup> “Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp, the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. Allah guides to His light whom He wills. And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah is Knowing of all things.”

Translation: quran.com

<sup>26</sup> Jodidio, *Museum of Islamic Art*, 60.

<sup>27</sup> *Learning from the Light*. Dir. Bo Landin, Sterling Van Wagenen. Cold River Productions, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Particularly the *ribat* in Monastir, Tunisia. Built in 796 A.D. (179 in the Islamic Calendar). Republique Tunisienne, Ministère de la culture. [http://www.patrimoinedetunisie.com.tn/fr/monuments/ribat\\_monastir.php](http://www.patrimoinedetunisie.com.tn/fr/monuments/ribat_monastir.php). Agence de mise en valeur du Patrimoine et de Promotion Culturelle, 2016. 5 Dec. 2016.

<sup>29</sup> *Learning from the Light*. Dir. Bo Landin, Sterling Van Wagenen. Cold River Productions, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> *Learning from the Light*. Dir. Bo Landin, Sterling Van Wagenen. Cold River Productions, 2009

Tunisian fortresses (*ribāṭ*) fascinated Pei because of their positioning on plains and against barren coastline, as well as for their secular nature.<sup>31</sup> The *ribāṭ* in the city of Monastir and the fortifications at Sousse are two examples that struck Pei gives when during his consideration of Islamic architectural history (Fig. 6).<sup>32</sup> He praises these buildings for their use of “pure cubic form” which, when cast in intense sunlight, creates beautiful contrasts of light and shadow. Both built largely at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century ACE, the *ribāṭs* appear somewhat apart from the urban fabric on their respective harbors. High curtain walls with semi-circular flanking towers that enclose a series of courtyards and interior structures that once held prayer halls, barracks, and other functional buildings tend to characterize these structures whose etymology and purpose present scholars with complicated questions (Fig. 7). The Brill *Encyclopedia of Islam* notes that “It can [...] be stated with confidence that to define [the *ribāṭ* as] a “Muslim military monastery” is evidence of extrapolation and misinterpretation, and this applies, whatever the period and the region. It cannot be denied that the urban residences of Ṣūfīs were subsequently known as *ribāṭ* [,for example].” Nasser Rabbat and Jacqueline Chabbi note that the buildings at Monastir and Sousse are characteristic of the structures that relate to the complicated term *ribāṭ* because the long histories of both show records of the structures as mystical or religious sites as well as military outposts.<sup>33</sup> The entries authored by Chabbi and Rabbat on the term and its meanings also detail how, over the centuries, a particular usage of *ribāṭ* seems to relate the word to structures or

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<sup>31</sup> Pei’s interpretation of the *ribāṭ* as a secular building is one that he articulates in *Learning from the Light*, but it is not an altogether sound assessment of these structures. *Ribāṭ* is a word invested with a variety of meanings that evolved over time. Early usage in the context of tribal warfare does not specifically refer to any type of construction, but rather references general preparations for battle. I will refer to the *ribāṭ* at Monastir, Tunisia as a fortification and secular structure as Pei does; however, it is important to note the many definitions of the term. (Chabbi, J. and Rabbat, Nasser, “Ribāṭ”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_COM\\_0919](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0919). 5 Dec. 2016)

<sup>32</sup> *Learning from the Light*. Dir. Bo Landin, Sterling Van Wagenen. Cold River Productions, 2009.

<sup>33</sup> (Chabbi, J. and Rabbat, Nasser, “Ribāṭ”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_COM\\_0919](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0919). 5 Dec. 2016)

endeavors along the frontiers of the Islamic world, both in the East towards central Asia and Byzantine outposts as well as in the West along the North African coast. Pei recalls that the functionality of the *ribāṭ* as a building-type appealed to him because he sought a structure that was not overtly ritualistic like a palace or mosque, a place “where life takes place”.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps he also connected to the idea of the *ribāṭ* as a structure on the edge, an outpost on a new frontier whose presence would indicate the ambitions of the builders (and the patrons).<sup>35</sup> The relative isolation of the Tunisian *ribāṭs* interested Pei greatly and influenced his decision to separate the Museum of Islamic Art from the urban landscape of Doha, to place his building on a “blank canvas”.<sup>36</sup> Each piece of the Tunisian fortifications is stark, bleached by the desert sun, and imposing against the beach and waves and creates the effect Pei desired for his museum. Pei’s decision to build the main building of the MIA on an artificial island and its campus on a crescent-shaped peninsula allowed him to give the building setting similar to the fortresses he so admired (Fig. 8). Tall and imposing, the MIA’s angular forms constructed in honey-colored stone<sup>37</sup> rise out of the Persian Gulf. The unadorned stone shapes change with the sun’s movements and stand in dramatic contrast to the dark, watery canvas. Isolating the MIA campus from Doha’s Corniche also served a practical purpose. It ensured that the building would not be suffocated by the grand skyscrapers and rapid development of the city so that it could maintain the spectacular effect of a grand structure appearing from a flat, barren expanse.<sup>38</sup> The MIA’s separation from Doha’s developing cityscape also allows it to remain out of time. It can remain a

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<sup>34</sup> A prayer hall is, however, included on first floor of the Museum of Islamic Art. *Learning from the Light*. Dir. Bo Landin, Sterling Van Wagenen. Cold River Productions, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Thinking about this structure in relation to the term “remote frontier” or “frontier exploration” often used by the petroleum industry when seeking new sources of fossil fuels is especially interesting.

<sup>36</sup> *Learning from the Light*. Dir. Bo Landin, Sterling Van Wagenen. Cold River Productions, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Imported stone from Magny and Chameçon in central France. (Philip Jodidio, *The New Architecture of Qatar* (Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc. 2014).

<sup>38</sup> This was a great concern of Pei’s when constructing the museum. Many Tunisian forts no longer have exactly the same effect as they once did because development now surrounds several of the structures. (See: <http://looklex.com/tunisia/photos/monastir14.jpg> )

constant presence on an unchanging piece of land; a monument that endlessly projects the aspirations and economic prosperity of Qatar.

Despite the Tunisian influence on the MIA, the “pure” geometric forms, sparsely-adorned beauty, and rich mythology of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo (Fig. 9) was the primary influence for the building as it appears today. Imposing in its severity, this mosque is the oldest surviving example of the Tulunid period (c. 868 AD-905 AD) in Cairo (built 876-879 A.D.). Other mosques built before and during the same period were either destroyed or have been extensively renovated.<sup>39</sup> The great stone structure is a *riwaq*-type. Series of arcades (*riwaqs*) enclose an open court with a large ablutions fountain (*fisqiya*) at its center (Fig. 10).<sup>40</sup> The pointed arches of the arcades lead the eye upward to a line of elaborate crenellations that adorn the roofline. Beyond, a spiral minaret added during a later renovation of the mosque mimics the form of the Great Mosque at Samarra.<sup>41</sup> The ablution fountain (*fisqiya*) at the middle of the barren courtyard (*sahn*) dates from the thirteenth-century renovations done under Mamluk rule (Swelim 169).<sup>42</sup>

The Mamluk fountain’s “pure volumes” set against vast emptiness of the stone court and cast in desert light provided Pei with his primary inspiration for the MIA exterior and atrium.<sup>43</sup> The fountain begins as a stone square with open arches on four sides rooted to the mosque’s court. A smaller square sits atop this foundation. Two octagons sit above. Each octagon is

<sup>39</sup> Tarek Swelim and Matjaž Kačičnik. *Ibn Tulun: His Lost City and Great Mosque*. The American University in Cairo Press, 2015., 65.

<sup>40</sup> Swelim, *Ibn Tulun*, 67.

<sup>41</sup> Swelim, *Ibn Tulun*, 172. The spiral minaret of the Great Mosque of Samarra is also mimicked in the Islamic Center of Doha. The Museum of Islamic Art and the Islamic Center face each other, one on its man-made island and the other set in the urban fabric of Doha.

<sup>42</sup> An inscription on the structure dates it to 1296, during the reign of Sultan Lajin. It states: “Has ordered the construction of this blessed dome, and fountain, and the noble sundials, our Lord, the Sultan al-Malik al-Mansur Husam al-Duniya wa-l-Din Lajin al-Mansuri, may his victory exalted, in the year six and ninety and six hundred” (Swelim 169-170).

<sup>43</sup> *Learning from the Light*. Dir. Bo Landin, Sterling Van Wagenen. Cold River Productions, 2009.

slightly rotated so as to be different from the other. These rotating forms give the fountain new facets as the light strikes it at different angles. The fountain culminates in a pointed stone dome featuring a *muqarnas* ceiling inside with small pointed windows at its base.<sup>44</sup>

Pei's MIA draws its inspiration from the series of stacked geometric forms used in the fountain at the Mosque of Ibn Tulun. The first floor of the museum is relatively square or rectangular in shape. Floors two through four are stacked octagons which rotate and become increasingly smaller the higher they appear. A cruciform shape with a dome caps the building. Sunlight is, thus, able to strike the MIA in much the same fashion as it does at the Ibn Tulun mosque. The light "activates" the aggregating shapes of the MIA. As sunlight moves throughout the day, the dimensions and appearance of the building seem to move and shimmer, a mirage isolated from the rest of Doha that seems to float on the surface of the Persian Gulf.

The influence of Ibn Tulun's mosque on the Museum of Islamic Art extends past the ablutions fountain into the mythology that surrounds the creation of the mosque. The story of the mosque's creation begins in the Egyptian desert with the Amir Ahmad Ibn Tulun. The pensive Amir and his entourage wander across the sands when the Amir's horse suddenly stumbles. A gap in the sand open by the horse's hoof reveals an ancient cave filled with "gold and silver coins, and all sorts of precious objects, that filled up the small subterranean room painted with vivid scenes of princely daily life."<sup>45</sup> Ibn Tulun declared that this presumably Pharaonic treasure was a gift from God that he would use to build a great mosque.<sup>46</sup> The Amir claimed that he had a vision of the mosque surviving the destruction of his city (Al Qa'tai, a new city built by Ibn that

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<sup>44</sup> Swelim notes that this shape is quite unique for this structure considering that it is really only seen in the mausolea of the Mamluk period (172).

<sup>45</sup> Ahdaf Soueif, *Reflections on Islamic Art* (Doha, Qatar: Museum of Islamic Art, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Licit funds acquired through means other than taxation (war, gifts, etc...) could be used for the construction of mosques that were usually meant to serve as the funerary complex of Sultan. Therefore, Ibn Tulun kept with the custom of Islamic rulers by using funds he stumbled upon in the desert.

is no longer extant), and standing alone on a great barren ridge where it would project God's greatness into eternity.<sup>47</sup>

The mythology of a treasure removed from beneath the earth and used to build a monument of great stature and permanence that would stand apart from its built-up environment and constantly remind viewers of timeless power surrounding Ibn Tulun and his mosque shares remarkable similarities with the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha which reflects something of these similarities in its interior. The Amir of Qatar used the riches of oil and gas found beneath the earth to fund the construction of Pei's grand "rotating cube" modelled on the ablutions fountain at Ibn Tulun. Within the MIA, one comes into contact with a monumental, light-filled atrium that stretches upward towards a stainless-steel dome with *muqarnas*-like decoration (Fig. 11). Pei creates a sense of wonder in this space using light that enters the space through a small oculus in the dome above and a monumental window that frames the post-modern landscape of glass towers across the water in the West Bay business district (Fig. 12). Philip Jodidio's book on the MIA relates this feature of the museum to the *mihrab*, the main prayer niche in a mosque that indicates the direction of prayer (*qibla*), although the window does not align towards Mecca as it should.<sup>48</sup> Despite the inaccuracies of its position in terms of Islamic prayer practices, considering the window in this way may suggest that Pei enshrines the oil-fueled progress by framing the glass and steel developments made possible by petro-dollars, that the "essence of Islam" is now somehow tied to petroleum. The light filtering through the floor-to-ceiling window bathes the U-shaped cantilevered balconies and triangular supports. Pale limestone used throughout this

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<sup>47</sup> Soueif, *Reflections on Islamic Art*, 190.

<sup>48</sup> Jodidio, *Museum of Islamic Art*, 63.

section of the interior creates a pale luminescence that contrasts sharply with the galleries designed by Wilmotte & Associates accessed through this space.

Dark, textured stone, wood, and metal combined with subtle lighting and towering cases made of non-reflective glass create a cave-like space that echoes the mythology of Ibn Tulun. awes the viewer by framing objects from the MIA's collection in a cave-like space. Jean-Michel Wilmotte, whose work appears in galleries throughout the world<sup>49</sup> sought to create a "theatrical atmosphere [in the galleries]" by using dark gray porphyry and wood tinted with gilt bronze powder that counter the lightness of materials used in the atrium of the MIA (Fig. 13).<sup>50</sup> A diverse collection of treasures including textiles, porcelain-ware, manuscript painting, and metalwork appear in both deep niches and tall glass cases that disappear in the shadowy gallery spaces, allowing the works to be highlighted by strategic fiber-optic lighting (Fig. 14).<sup>51</sup> These features isolate each individual object in space, as visitors' eyes adjust to the darkness, works can be discovered, re-creating the discovery of the subterranean treasure in the foundation myth of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun. The cave-like space echoes both the cave found in the desert by Ibn Tulun, but it is also equivalent to the vast deposits of crude found under the desert in Qatar; the equivalent of and also product of the spoils brought by that virtually-infinite wealth. The MIA may be shrouded in the same mythology of divine riches used to build an eternal structure, but the museum emanates the power of oil and that false promise of eternity rather than the wonder of the Divine that Ibn Tulun sought to immortalize in stone.

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<sup>49</sup> Jodidio's profile of Wilmotte notes his work on the 1994 refurbishment of the Champs-Élysées, his work on the so-called "primitive" galleries at the Louvre, and at galleries from South Korean to Lebanon. His firm also designs a number of commercial interiors. Jodidio, *Museum of Islamic Art*, 198.

<sup>50</sup> Jodidio, *Museum of Islamic Art*, 202.

<sup>51</sup> Jodidio, *Museum of Islamic Art*, 190.



## The MIA and Time: Robert Smithson's Definitions of Entropy and Monumentality

Pei's transformation of Doha's coastline through land reclamation and the MIA's complicated relationships with oil, mythologies, and history recall the works and writings of another monument builder whose works explore time on a sweeping scale: Robert Smithson. A central figure in late-twentieth art history, I argue that Smithson's land art, particularly *Spiral Jetty* (1970), and his definitions of monuments in his 1966 essay published in *Artforum*, entitled "Entropy and the New Monuments," provide a vehicle to read the Museum of Islamic Art's temporality and the effects of oil on its relationships to time.

"Entropy and the New Monuments" records Smithson's admiration for the works of several members of the "Park Place Group" and his assertion that their works represent the "new" monuments. The Smithsonian Archives of American Art describes the Park Place Group as a collection of artists that eventually included figures such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Sol Lewitt, and Robert Grosvenor that formed around 1963 in New York where an informal gallery space at 79 Park Place in Manhattan originally hosted the group's activities and gave it its name. The gallery—which subsequently moved from the original address—closed in 1967, but during its tenure produced an innovative body of Minimalist and other abstract works. Smithson categorized several of the objects that first appeared in the gallery as "new" monuments. These works utilized "artificial materials, plastic, chrome, and electric light,"<sup>52</sup> materials that he argued are built "not [...] for the ages, but rather against the ages." Petroleum products (plastics) or materials made possible by the progress in technological development petroleum thus define "new" monuments; they defy time in their refusal to decay or breakdown. Opposed to works such as Dan Flavin's electric light installations and Donald Judd's strict geometric sculptures

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<sup>52</sup> Nancy Holt, *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 10.

(Fig. 15) are the “old” monuments constructed of “marble, granite, or other kinds of rock.”<sup>53</sup>

“Old” monuments, Smithson argues, cause us to “remember the past,” which his essay seems to consider the opposite of the temporality of the “new” monuments that do not move forward with progressive time, but remain fixed in an objective present that I argue is defined by petroleum.

The limestone and porphyry massiveness of the Museum of Islamic Art would appear to place it firmly in the category of the “old” monument and in many ways it is a structure dedicated to memorializing a glorious Islamic past in the present. Pei’s quotation of structures from the early days of Islamic civilization and the concept of creating a solid, structural expression of the “essence of Islam” further bolster the argument that it belongs to Smithson’s “old” monuments. However, I argue that the museum is an amalgam of the two binaries laid out by Smithson in his argument for “new” and “old” monuments. The MIA, while not made of the stuff of the “new” monuments interacts with these plastics and other petroleum products as they appear in geologic strata, the wreckage that defines the Age of the Anthropocene.

Part of the appeal of the “new” monuments in Smithson’s essay is their sense of entropy, but entropy not as a quality of chaos or disorder in the universe, but as perfect equilibrium. Art historian Jennifer Roberts writes that Smithson considered the “governing characteristic of entropic systems [to be] their equilibrium, or, in other words, their absolute regularity.”<sup>54</sup> The artist’s essay records his admiration of this uniformity quality in Donald Judd’s sculptures (see Fig. 15), in particular. He refers to Judd’s often untitled works that show no signs of subjective workmanship on their Plexiglas and steel surfaces. Smithson writes that the sculptures, which he calls a “series of motionless intervals based on an order of solids,” allow “the eye to see time as

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<sup>53</sup> Holt, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Jennifer L. Roberts, *Mirror-Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 44.

an infinity of surfaces or structures.”<sup>55</sup> The artist’s definition of entropy appears in the shifting geometric forms, the stone aggregations that form the exterior of the Museum of Islamic Art. Those forms drawn from the ablutions fountain at the Mosque of Ibn Tulun create an array of perfectly regular surfaces that appear endless as the sun illuminates and casts into shadow the various parts, causing the viewer to be unsure of just how many light stone figures make up the whole. This crucial formal similarity between the MIA and the “new” monuments blurs the lines around the two categories by Smithson. In the highly-ordered structures of the “new” monuments and the MIA, time becomes “stationary and without movement.” Entropy as equilibrium, in Smithson’s terms, freezes time and creates a “place minus motion.” Time as it functions in the MIA works in this fashion. Pei’s stark, geometric building isolated on its man-made island from the rapid progression of time represented by the building boom along Doha’s Corniche halts the progression of time, an advantageous paradigm when oil is considered in this equation.

While buildings in the West Bay district punctuate the skyline with futuristic high-rises, Pei creates a monument that suspends and enshrines this current moment of Qatar’s current economic power and our global moment of consistent reliance on fossil fuels and petroleum products. Moving into the future inevitably means the obsolescence of petroleum as climate change disrupts the earth’s weather patterns, anxiety and public outcry concerning fossil fuels increase, and the eventual exhaustion of petroleum sources looms in the future. The MIA pauses the progression of time. It is a kind of moment-monument hybrid built on and sharing the qualities of those petroleum-based products, those “new” monuments constantly accumulating on the surface of the earth; those products that will long outlast the anthropocene.

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<sup>55</sup> Holt, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 10.

Considering a second definition of entropy, deposition, provides further insight into time as it appears in the MIA and the appearance of this form of entropy in the complex offers the only instance where the decline of fossil fuels is visible in Pei's creation, where the veil of artwash lifts and the transience of this present moment of fossil fuel-dominance becomes evident. To understand depositional time in the MIA complex, it is crucial to understand the significance of the salt deposits that accumulate on *Spiral Jetty* (Fig. 16-17). Jennifer Roberts writes that salt is the essential component of *Spiral Jetty*, that the constant addition of new crystals constitute a "revised appendix to Smithson's work."<sup>56</sup> Salt puts the sculpture in a constant state of flux and signifies the effects of time on the static regularity of the sculpture. The waters of the Great Salt Lake ebb and flow, and the salt masses in the pink water along its edges, in the *Jetty's* curvilinear form, disrupting the frozen moment of time with the signs of progression, of deposition, and of damage to the sculpture itself.<sup>57</sup> *Spiral Jetty* works to make us forget the end of our human dominance, so much of which has been made possible by fossil fuels, but salt and physical reminders of the post-oil future litter Rozel Point in the form of derelict oil infrastructure including an abandoned oil tank and rusting trucks make this act of forgetting impossible. Smithson's work interacts with the history of extraction at Rozel Point and, in many ways, gives form to the myth of oil that celebrates human sovereignty over nature, a quality often seen in land art. As we grow closer to a time when fossil fuels will no longer be feasible due to environmental concerns, however, *Spiral Jetty* also takes on new meaning as the effects of climate change transform water and salt levels around the sculpture. Slowly, the past of oil extraction and Rozel Point and the post-oil future meet in the "objective present" of Smithson's monument.

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<sup>56</sup> Roberts, *Mirror Travels*, 136.

<sup>57</sup> Holt, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 15.

The MIA building itself may not have this same “entropic” quality, but, positioned at the far end of the crescent of land that forms the museum’s park, is Richard Serra’s 7 (2011) whose corroded steel surface provides an answer to the salt of *Spiral Jetty* and Rozel Point’s decaying oil infrastructure (Fig. 18-19). Serra’s first sculpture in the Near East, 7 draws on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century Ghazni minarets in Afghanistan. His sculpture imitates the vertical planes of the towers and the play of shadows that transforms their carved stone surfaces under the glaring sun of the barren steppe on which they are built. 7 is composed of seven weatherproof but corroded steel plates arranged, like the Ghazni minarets, in a series of angled planes. The sculpture rises to a height of eighty feet, Serra’s tallest work of this kind, and ultimately forms a heptagonal shape. Positioned at the end of the curving artificial bay of the MIA complex, the steel plates are particularly exposed to the wind and sea spray of the Gulf. Accumulating rust on the surface of 7 streaks and blots the imposing steel plates and gives the viewer the impression of a piece of industrial equipment or a beam that was left there on the edge of the MIA’s park. One can step inside the structure and, because of careful framing by the artist, enjoy a perfect view of the museum. The intention of the sculpture is to “[mark] the landscape between the museum and the skyline of Doha” and mediate between the MIA and the towers of West Bay.<sup>58</sup> This seems an odd purpose for Serra’s sculpture because its rust, which shows times progression in the otherwise frozen present of the complex, appears like the apparition of decay in the neat and controlled environment of the MIA. Dark and rusty, 7’s position against the post-modern cityscape of glass and chrome suggests this approaching future of decrepitude for the gleaming buildings signifying progress rising across the bay. The framed view of the main museum building seen from inside of the sculpture reminds the viewer that, despite the fact that there is not the slightest hint of Big Oil in the MIA, that industry made its construction possible. Rust

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<sup>58</sup> Alfred Pacquement, *Richard Serra* (Doha: Qatar Museums Authority and Steidl, 2014), 255.

and metal frames the brightness of the stone under the sun and shatters the image of the museum's timelessness with the increasing corrosion that represents the progression of time, a progression that disrupts the stasis the petroleum industry so desperately wants to keep and that it fashions in buildings like the MIA through petro-philanthropy.

### **Conclusion: The Post-Oil Museum**

Criticism of Big Oil's sponsorship of museums and other cultural institutions cannot ignore the fact that the funding these sponsors bring is desperately needed. Mel Evans notes that, although often necessary to the operations of many institutions, oil sponsorship is "evidently self-serving [...] simulate[s] an authenticity at the galleries to build the trust of special publics in order to maintain the social license to operate."<sup>59</sup> Tolerance for oil sponsorship wanes across the world as awareness of global climate change grows and groups take action against institutions with the intention of inspiring divestment. The most prominent recent example of divestment is the end of BP's 26-year partnership with the Tate in the United Kingdom—a relationship heavily criticized by the activist group Liberate Tate. Composed of artists and concerned citizens, this group, of which Mel Evans is a part, staged protests against BP sponsorship in the various museums that make up the Tate. Often these protests involved performance art pieces during which members would spill black paint across gallery floors or over the bodies of one of the participants in order to make petroleum visible to patrons whose only clue to the BP sponsorship were logos scattered throughout the museums. Liberate Tate's efforts are, however, just one example of protest against petro-philanthropy, perhaps an extreme expression of the growing attitude against the presence of Big Oil in spaces meant to be democratic and elevating to the publics that they serve. This attitude must be translated into

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<sup>59</sup> Evans, *Artwash*, 166.

action by artists, curators, development officers and the public at large in order to bring about divestment from petro-philanthropy. While museums remain important ritual structures for contemplation and exhibition of various histories, Evans asserts that the museum, and art in general, has become a battleground for corporate control, for influence and prestige on the stage of our evermore interconnected world. Post-oil museums will disengage from the caustic politics that oil carries into the gallery and from the inequalities that Big Oil uses the gather to veil and secret away using artwash. Time in the post-oil museum will no longer be frozen in our current moment of fossil fuel reliance, but instead it will memorialize the past while looking into the future—it will speak to progress without the stringencies of injustice or artwash that petro-philanthropy places on cultural institutions.

Paul Goldberger states in his lecture on the MIA that art museums offer us “the very idea of immortality.”<sup>60</sup> Museums act as depositories for fragments of history and community and, in these ritual spaces, objects can be organized into narratives that inform, educate, and provide visitors with a sense of a multiplicity of civilizations. The MIA is no exception, but while it functions as a free museum intended for the education and elevation of Qataris, the state also uses the museum as a tool to both project an image of cultural clout to the international community and to artwash its damaging extraction activities. Pei’s monument recounts in objects the long and glorious history of Islamic civilizations from Morocco to Southeast Asia, and houses this collection of visual histories in a stunning building that captures something of the “essence of Islam.” The success of the MIA cannot, however, be separated from its more complex and troubling implications that derive from petro-philanthropy. Individuals, corporations, and states that donate or utilize funds gained by the sale of oil to cultural

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<sup>60</sup> Goldberger, I.M. Pei and the Challenge of the Modern,” 16.

institutions inevitably create a layer of implications over that institution's meanings that transform the museum into a monument to the current moment of oil-driven economic prosperity in Qatar and the Age of the Anthropocene.



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Fig. 1: The ALRIWAQ contemporary art gallery with the Museum of Islamic Art in the background. Photo: [www.qm.org.qa](http://www.qm.org.qa)



Fig. 2: Souq Waqif and, in the background, the spiral minaret of The Sheikh Abdulla Bin Zaid Al Mahmoud Islamic Cultural Center. Photo: [www.globespots.com](http://www.globespots.com)

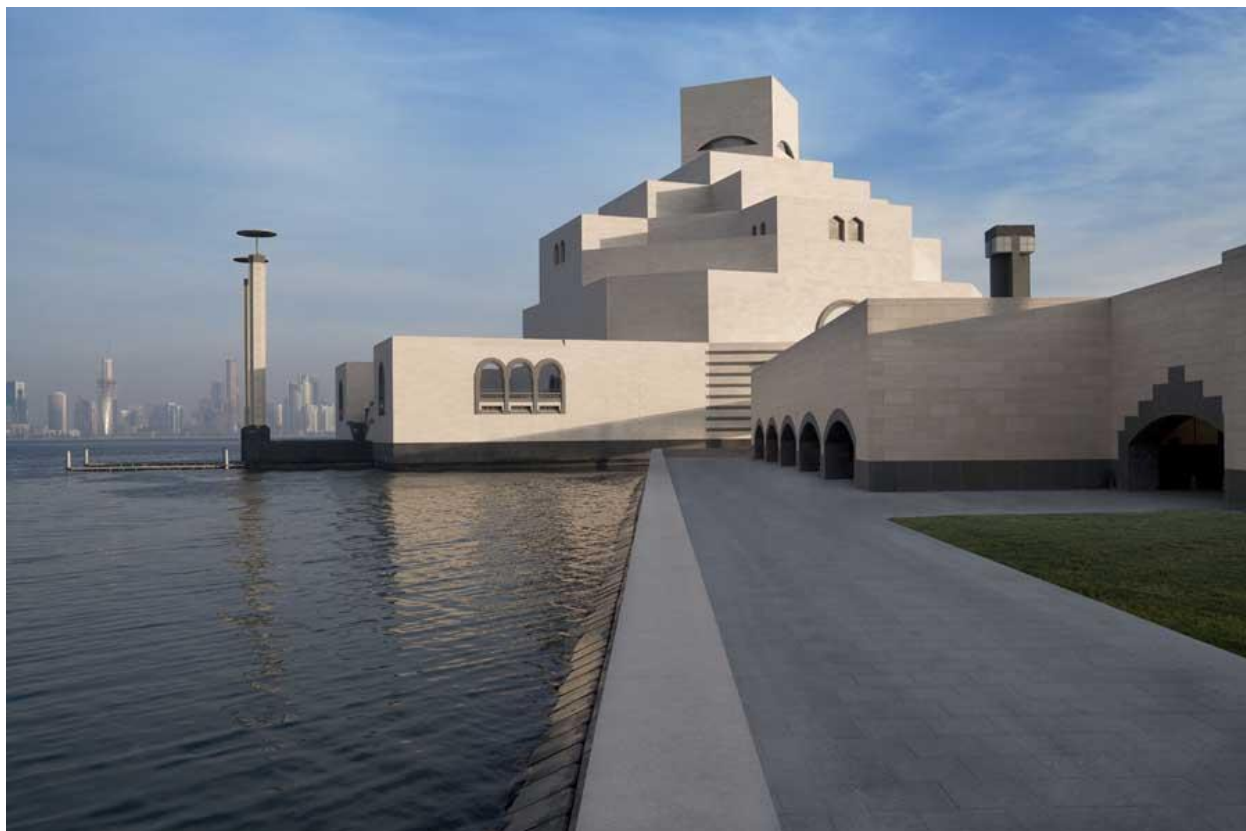


Fig. 3: The Museum of Islamic Art with the West Bay business district in the background. Photo: <http://www.e-architect.co.uk>



Fig. 4: The Emiri Diwan of Qatar, seat of the royal family and administrative center of the country. Photo: <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/35963532>





Fig. 5: The interior of the Great Mosque of Cordoba. Photo: <https://www.pinterest.com/guymiche/cordoba-spain/>



Fig. 6: The *ribāt* of Sousse. View of the interior courtyard. Photo: [www.lepatrimoinecaflashe.ca](http://www.lepatrimoinecaflashe.ca)



Fig. 7: The *ribāṭ* of Monastir viewed from the city's harbor. Photo: [www.larousse.fr](http://www.larousse.fr)



Fig. 8: The Museum of Islamic Art in Doha. Aerial view showing the crescent of the bay and the surrounding park. Photo: [www.ad.ntust.edu.tw](http://www.ad.ntust.edu.tw)



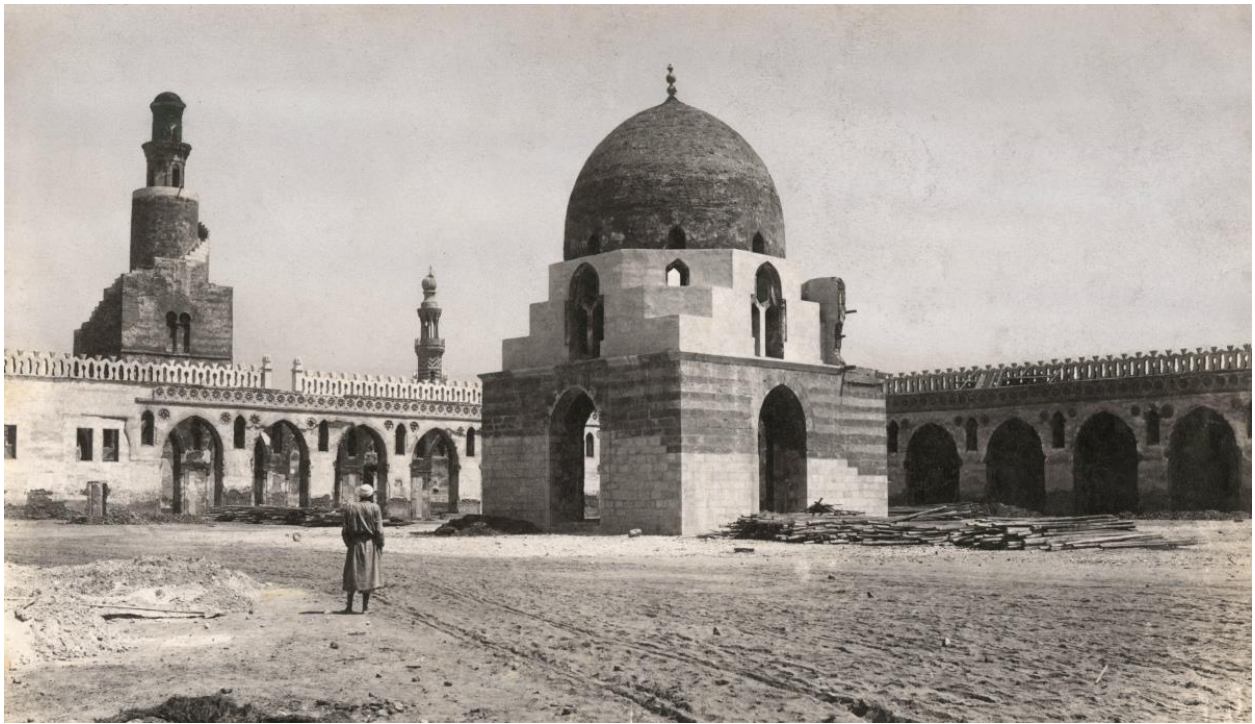


Fig. 9: The Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, Egypt. The ablutions fountain is the domed structure in the center.  
Photo: [www.architecture.com](http://www.architecture.com)

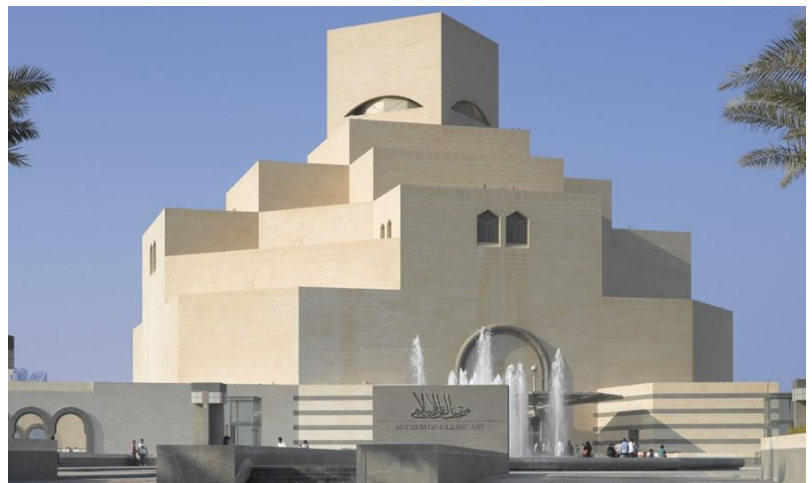


Fig. 10: Left, the ablutions fountain at the Mosque of Ibn Tulun; right, the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha. Photos:  
[cdn.wanderlust.co.uk](http://cdn.wanderlust.co.uk)



Fig. 11: The atrium inside the Museum of Islamic Art with the *muqarnas*-decorated dome crowning the architectural ensemble. Photo: [kaihenrikbarth.com](http://kaihenrikbarth.com)



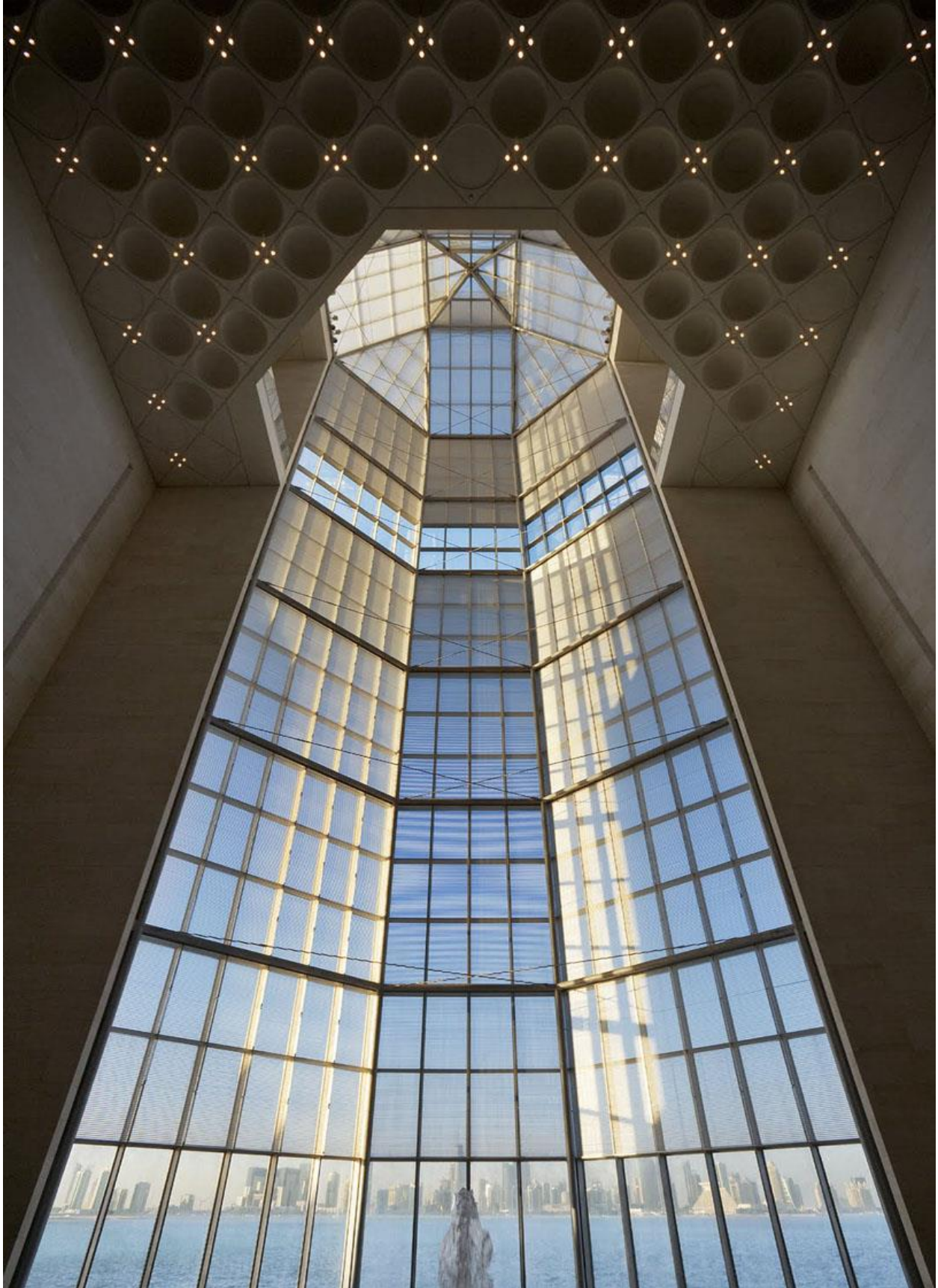


Fig. 12: The main window in the Museum of Islamic Art framing the West Bay business district. Photo: [www.idesignarch.com](http://www.idesignarch.com)





(Above) Fig. 13: Dark porphyry used in the interiors creates a dim, cave-like interior. (Below) Fig. 14: One of the Museum of Islamic Art's gallery spaces featuring oversize cases of non-reflective glass. Photos: <http://www.wilmotte.com>



Fig. 15: *Untitled (DSS 120)*, 1968. An example of one of Donald Judd's stacked sculptures. Photo: <http://www.mnuchingallery.com>





(Above) Fig. 16: Salt accumulated on *Spiral Jetty*. (Below) Fig. 17: *Spiral Jetty* (1970) Photos: [blog.artsper.com](http://blog.artsper.com)



Fig. 18: Richard Serra's 7 (2011) set against the background of the West Bay district in Doha. Photo: <http://www.qm.org.qa>



Fig. 19: Richard Serra's 7 (2011). Photo: <http://www.qm.org.qa>